

Despite Appearances California's Republican Party is Still Looking Backward

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In California on Tuesday, as widely expected, Carly Fiorina and Meg Whitman won primaries for U.S. Senator and Governor of California respectively. The California Republican Party is trying to present these victories as historic because they are the first time that their party has nominated a woman for either office. On closer scrutiny, the assertion that this is historic underscores nothing other than the extent to which women have been kept out of leadership positions in California's Republican Party.

In fairness to the Republicans, no woman from any party has ever been elected Governor of California, but in recent elections two have come close; and they have both been Democrats. In 1994, Dianne Feinstein lost the general election narrowly to Republican Pete Wilson. Four years later, Kathleen Brown lost more decisively to Wilson. Whitman's election would be historic for California, but her nomination is significantly less historic.

The idea that Fiorina's nomination is historic is even more tenuous as two women have represented California in the US Senate since 1992. Should Fiorina win, she would become the third woman to represent California in the senate. Fiorina's opponent, California's junior senator Barbara Boxer, was first elected to the senate in 1992. A Fiorina victory might be historic for the Republican Party who not only have never elected a woman to the Senate, but have been defeated in seven straight elections for that office, with Boxer winning in 1992, 1998 and 2004 and Dianne Feinstein defeating Republicans in 1992, 1994, 2000 and 2006.

It is not, however, Fiorina and Whitman's gender that is most important and revealing, but their backgrounds. Both are businesswomen who have worked as CEOs, Fiorina for Hewlett Packard and Whitman for Ebay. Not coincidentally, they both relied on ample personal wealth to win their primaries and will be able to draw on this wealth in their general elections campaigns as well. In this regard Fiorina and Whitman are not so unusual for a party that has nominated and elected numerous wealthy business executives to office around the country, and may well nominate Mitt Romney for President in 2012. In this regard, the outcomes of the California primaries do not demonstrate that the Republican Party there is forward looking and oriented towards the future, but that they are still stuck in the same trite and tiresome story lines.

The narrative around Fiorina and Whitman, that their strong business backgrounds make them qualified for office and knowledgeable about public policy, are reminders, almost quaint ones, of another era, but they seem strikingly out of place in post-recession California. Corporate America has lost a great deal of its shine in recent months as finance firms and other big businesses have become the target popular and political attacks from members of both parties. Today leaders of these kinds of firms are broadly viewed as part of the problem, not as able to offer solutions.

Californians who have suffered and lost their jobs or homes during this recent recession may have a hard time believing that turning the leadership of their state, and their voices in Washington, over to people of extraordinary wealth, little political experience and far too much sympathy for corporate America, regardless of their gender, is a wise idea. The CEO presidency of the Bush years is a reminder of the dubious wisdom of allowing former business executives to run the government, one that many voters still have not forgotten. It is also a reminder that, campaign rhetoric aside, government and business really are different and require different approaches and attitudes.

The counter-example to this which might be cited is New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg who made a fortune in the finance sector before being elected to his current position three times. Bloomberg, however, became mayor of New York in 2001, well before the current economic downturn. It is true that he won his most recent campaign in 2009, but he won by only five points in a campaign in which he [outspent his Democratic challenger by a margin of more than ten to one](#). Neither Whitman nor Fiorina will enjoy this kind of a spending advantage over their Democratic opponents.

In California, the Democrats in California are nominating a candidate for Governor, Jerry Brown, who was last elected to that office in 1978 and who once ran against Jimmy Carter for his party's presidential nomination, yet remarkably it is the Republican Party that appears stuck in the past. Republican rhetoric about business leaders who have the unique experience needed to govern and create jobs seems bizarrely out of touch in 2010. It is almost as if the party thinks that by pretending the economic crisis hasn't happened, its effects will go away.